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ABSTRACT

Several cultural traits often associated with Anglo-American tradition are examined, and their significance in the debate over the spread of English as the world's dominant language is discussed. It is argued that these traits of Anglo-American culture are generally beneficial to society and individuals within it, and that they are reflected in the English language. The first cultural asset discussed is wealth. Just as physical and cultural factors are seen as contributing to the society's overall affluence, English is seen as linguistically rich and expansionist. The second attribute of Anglo-American society examined is egalitarianism. In the same way that the society has supported egalitarian principles, English reflects these principles in a number of historical developments: loss of "thou"; a leveling of honorifics; and the emergence of commonly used slang. Third, individualism is explored. In English, "I" is capitalized despite its non-capitalized German antecedent; the use of the prefix "self-" has multiplied; and literacy is widespread, signifying the importance of the individual in society. It is proposed, based on these observations, that the spread of English throughout the world is a benignly subversive activity, corresponding to a spreading of democratic societal values. (MSE)

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# ESL: ENGLISH AS A SUBVERSIVE LANGUAGE

A Thesis Presented

by

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*[English] is the powerful language of resistance . . . it is the dialect of common sense. It is the speech of the proud and melancholy races and of all who aspire. It is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage. It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible.*

-Walt Whitman

## INTRODUCTION

Guilt! Guilt! Guilt! Who among us English teachers has not cringed with guilt over the part we play in spreading English as the dominant language of the world? For so it is - by the tally of McCrum, Cran and McNeil in *The Story of English* , it is "used by at least 750 million people, and barely half of those speak it as a mother tongue . . . English at the end of the twentieth century is more widely scattered, more widely spoken and written, than any other language has ever been. It has become *the* language of the planet, the first truly global language." (McCrum, et alia, 1986)

In theory, a global language seems a good idea, but why English? Why this tongue spawned by Germanic plunderers, grown up through sanguinary centuries as the idiom of conquest, colonialism and capitalism?

ESL teachers with the least sense of history know the mixed legacy, and the resentment it inspires, and it makes us nervous. Most of us are already ill-at-ease in our own culture. We gravitate toward the fringe, toward alternative lifestyles and left-wing politics and seedy neighborhoods and the company of foreigners. We stand aloof from Anglo-American civilization, viewing it from the bottom up, in empathy with its victims, intensely aware of its besetting sins of pride, materialism, aggressiveness, coldness of heart and linear thinking.

And yet, and yet . . . English is the coin in which we traffic, the birthright on which we are cashing in. Willy-nilly, we are the agents of its diffusion, the vanguard of its cultural influence. But no! we cry. Let us spread the language but NOT the culture. Let us equip all the yearning millions with words enough to run computers and get in on the economy, but WITHOUT diluting their indigenous ways. Let us work toward a *culturally-neutral* English.

Serious calls for such a thing have gone up, usually from places ravaged by British or American imperial rule. But much as we sympathize, does anyone really think such a thing possible? A value-free language? Moreover, doesn't this run afoul of one premise of the multicultural outlook, to wit, that all cultures have things to teach each other?

I've spent twenty years thinking and two years writing about this quandary, and I offer today a solution, whereby English language teachers may be freed of guilt and affirmed in their rebellious instincts. I assert that however much of ill is conveyed through contact with the Anglo-American

tradition, there is more of good; and that the cross-fertilization that results will be better still. In sum, that the teaching of English is a benignly subversive activity.

To engage sympathies in this brash claim, I put a direct question to readers: How many of you prefer the cultural value of, say, sexual equality to that of male dominance? Now, our profession is about 70% female (judging by 1992 TESOL membership), so I would make bold to guess that most readers incline toward the former.

But, you quickly counter, this society is notoriously sexist and patriarchal! To which I reply: perhaps, but how much moreso is every other place on earth? Why, I ask, did the modern women's movement originate in the United States, taking as polemical model the Declaration of Independence, which itself spun off of Locke, Blackstone, Milton and other English sources stretching back to Magna Carta and beyond?

Bringing it back to linguistics, which language first hatched the honorific that challenged male dominance by concealing marital status: "Ms."? Which one now fights the Pronoun Wars, latest instance of a power shift being reflected in the grammar? These trends have spread to other lands, but hey, you saw it here first. Why?

I submit, first, that there are aspects of Anglo-American culture that tend to the general happiness, regardless of cultural setting. Second, I will try to show how certain of these tendencies, arbitrarily selected, are reflected in the structure of the language- its lexis, syntax, morphology, orthography, etc.

Languages don't evolve in a vacuum, and as English grew up it was bound to embody the cultural distinctives of England (and later, its colonial offshoots). From this tradition have come some of the most influential political and social ideas now convulsing the globe - representative democracy, the free market, rule of law, egalitarianism, individualism. To be sure, many other cultures have developed and advanced these ideals as well, yet none so successfully as the English-speaking peoples.

Before plunging in, an important caveat: the traits I discuss are NOT to be understood as any kind of racial property. Though originating among the English, when that folk were relatively homogeneous, they have been nurtured over the centuries by a highly, and increasingly, diverse ethnic population. In short, they are CULTURAL expressions, learnable and transferable like all facets of culture.

To illustrate, the current anglophone colossus, the United States, was once an ethnic extension of the United Kingdom. In 1790, 90% of the white population claimed British extraction. But after two centuries, that statistic has practically reversed. In the 1980 census, only 14% of the total claimed British heritage, barely ahead of Hispanics. In other words, the overwhelming majority of the United States population, or their forebears, had once to learn English as a second language. And whatever cultural traits now unite them were transmitted, not inborn.

On a personal note, my background is Welsh, mostly, and the Welsh enjoy the distinction of being the first-ever victims of Anglo-Saxon oppression. My tribe went down fifteen hundred years ago, commencing the long sad litany of vanquished peoples - Irish, Pict, Algonquin, Hindu, Hausa, Maori, ad nauseum. Yea, were I to be touting some racial gospel, the blood of my ancestors would cry out. Rather, I rejoice in the motley texture of the current anglophone world, and the knack of former victims to percolate up to positions of power and influence; witness the recent romp of Irish-American politicians - Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan.

Now, in each chapter, I will first discuss some cultural value in its historic context; then, I will explore how that trait might be reflected in different areas of the language.

## CHAPTER 1 - WEALTH

Why are the English-speaking nations so bloody rich? This question is highly germane to the popularity of the language, for surely the paramount motive of non-native speakers to learn English is for material advantage. Does any of us pretend that acquaintance with Shakespeare outweighs access to computer technology as an incentive? Hear McCrum, et alia: "Three quarters of the world's mail, and its telexes and cables, are in English. So are more than half the world's technical and scientific periodicals: it is the language of technology from Silicon Valley to Shanghai. English is the medium for 80 percent of the information stored in the world's computers. Nearly half of all business deals in Europe are conducted in English." (McCrum, 1986)

Nowadays, of course, a resurgent Europe and Japan are crowding the English-speaking countries at the top of the wealth charts. But even they are outselling and outhustling us largely through the medium of English. Some multinational companies, with a workforce hailing from various nations, require English as the common tongue. Italian pilots in Italian air space communicate with Italian air traffic controllers in English. More people in China study English than do so in the U.S., and the English speakers of India outnumber those of England.

Even grumblers about the spread of English attest to this, though indirectly. Braj Kachru points up that there are three distinct groups of speakers: 350 million in countries whose first language is English, 250 million in mostly former colonies for whom it is the second, and another several hundred

million for whom it is simply a preferred foreign language. He contends that for the vast number in the latter two groups, the allure of English has nothing to do with its culture. It merely serves as a lingua franca, as pidgin English (or Dutch or French or Portugese) did during much of the colonial period. (*English in Its Social Context*, ed. Machan & Scott, 1992)

As I argued before, he is probably right if he equates cultural appeal with literary tradition, but wrong if it is broadened to include the more practical uses. The bottom line is that poor but ambitious youth from Bolivia to Botswana, Korea to Khirgiz, gravitate to the study of English - not French, Spanish, Russian or Chinese. Why? Might they intuit that anglophone society knows something about making money?

WHY SO RICH? PHYSICAL FACTORS

To return to our original question, one could say that England, America, et alia, are rich because they stole it all from weaker peoples. And that is true, up to a point. Yet history is rife with plundering nations that have risen for a season, ravaged their neighbors, then lapsed back into somnolent poverty - the Mongols, the Arabs, the Spanish. The English have not. They might have, but for two assets - one geographical and one cultural.

The first was the mixed blessing of a fat and fertile island off the European coast. It was naturally rich enough to attract waves of invaders, from earliest time through Celt, Roman, Angle, Saxon, Dane, Viking and Norman. But then came the remarkable nine-hundred-year stretch of no invasion (despite close calls with the Armada, Napoleon, Hitler). The band of sea

separating Britain from the continent was narrow but significant, giving the island just enough isolation to escape more frequent ravishment. Thus English society could develop in relative peace, struggling its slow way into unification under a royal line, subjection of island neighbors, and development of political and commercial structures.

Still, until the 1600's England was inconsequential globally, viewed by most as little better than successful pirates. Again, geography shaped character; England's island position impelled her people to develop maritime skills, and nurtured a hardy, questing, curious spirit that soon flowered into a distinct gift for imperialism. In the late Elizabethan era, Britain began in earnest to follow Spain and Portugal in grabbing territory East and West, round Africa to Asia in newfound sea lanes, and across the Atlantic to the hapless New World. Thus began the Empire on which the sun would never set.

CULTURAL FACTORS

So, wealth to some extent flowed from geography. But unlike Spain and Portugal, England waxed stronger and richer for three hundred more years, to be eclipsed only by its American spawn. Why? It's a complex question, but I suspect it had much to do with British superiority in technology which, combined with particular social traditions, resulted in the greatest system of wealth-production yet seen - democratic capitalism.

Let us hearken to the seminal year 1776. As noted before, empires that rest purely on the sword rise and fall all the time, and in that year the British Empire endured a body blow. With the loss of the the American colonies, its

actual territorial extent began to diminish. It might then have begun sinking to the level of Spain, but for other currents that were distilled and expressed in a book.

For 1776 also saw the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Its basic thesis was that a nation's wealth derived not only from natural resources, but also from spiritual ones (broadly defined). That is, the most important capital was human capital - an educated, mobile and *free* population. Free to choose employment, to borrow and invest, to invent and improve; free of confiscatory threats to property; free to start businesses in fair competition, without obstruction from state monopolies; in sum, free to deploy entrepreneurial energies that, when released, would lead to the general enrichment.

This challenged the conventional wisdom of mercantilism, whereby economic policy was set by royal fiat, and colonies were thought to exist purely for the benefit of the mother country. It was just such short-sighted mercantilist measures that had sparked the American rebellion (giving Boston the distinction touted by our current governor as "the cradle of democratic capitalism.")

Smith urged trust in the "invisible hand of the marketplace" rather than the heavy hand of aristocratic ministers. When the American debacle seemed to vindicate his views, royal prerogatives were checked further by Parliament, and Britain entered the nineteenth century wedded to the doctrine of Free Trade. It worked. As government increasingly withdrew from directing the economy, Britain rebounded and knew its Golden Age, a century of

unrivalled global dominance. The new wealth, to be sure, was shared unevenly, and the Industrial Revolution wrought dreadful dislocation, as a mostly rural workforce adjusted to urbanization. But the overall trend was plain, and other lands envied Britain's level of prosperity.

They envied still more the greater wealth of the bumptious new American republic, where free-market ideas held firmer sway. Of course prosperity here owed to certain physical factors - exploitation of a naturally rich continent, displacement of indigenous peoples, and cheap labor from black slaves or a constant stream of ill-paid immigrants. But of far greater importance, I would argue, was the tradition of limited government influence over the economy, which helped spur internal dynamism.

To summarize, we English-speakers are rich partly for what our national governments do (keep a sound currency, preserve internal order, defend us from attack), but more for what they don't do (determine allocation of resources). Our wealth derived first from fortunate natural circumstances, but then from an institutionalized bias against strong, centralized authority; as the sainted Jefferson put it, "That government is best which governs least." It is this complex of conditions and ideas, this recipe for enrichment, that won the Cold War, and now serves as a model for most countries on earth.

WEALTH OF LANGUAGE

Now, how is this reflected in the history of the language? Just as England started out with a good base for prosperity, to wit, a fertile island relatively

isolated from continental strife, so the language early on had a firm foundation of Germanic roots. But its resources expanded enormously with each early invasion - the Danes in the 700's, Vikings in the 900's, Norman French after 1066. It received as well the more peaceable infusions of Latin and Greek, as Christian evangelization slowly seeped in, giving rude Anglo-Saxon the subtler, more abstract concepts of Mediterranean civilization. By the 1400's English had absorbed them all into a rich stew, combining both major branches of Western European language, Latin and Germanic, laying the groundwork for the lexical colossus it is today. (Official estimate of Oxford English Dictionary: 500,000 words. Nearest competitor: German, with 140,000.) (McCrum, 1986)

So, it may be said of English that there's a lot of it. The richness of a language, of course, is not purely a function of vocabulary; yet a large lexis helps. More to our purpose is the manner in which it grew, and certain tendencies that correlate with the economic fortunes of its speakers. We will consider four episodes: the loss of inflections in the 700's; the failed effort to impose French in the Norman era; the debates over standardization in the 1600's and 1700's; and the receptivity to loan-words that has especially typified American English in the last century.

1. LOSS OF INFLECTIONS

A proper global language ought to be a teachable one. On this line, professional purveyors of English must groan in embarrassment at many of its features; yet in one respect it is easier - the relative lack of inflectional endings. Except for the verb "to be" ("I am," "you are," "he/she/it is," etc.),

our verbs don't change much with regard to person or number. Our adjectives, adverbs and articles don't change at all. Baugh and Cable, in their classic *A History of the English Language,* cite this as a strength: "A second asset which English possesses to a preeminent degree is inflectional simplicity." (p. 10) This contrasts sharply with modern German, and with its old derivative, Anglo-Saxon. (Baugh and Cable, 1957)

What happened? We know these endings started dropping away in the 700's, when the Angles and Saxons suffered poetic justice by being invaded themselves. Yet the Danes who soon settled over roughly half the island were ethnically close to their predecessors. Their language, likewise, was a close cousin within the Germanic family.

This similarity, in the theory of English linguist Tom Shippey, led to a wearing-away process during commercial contacts between old and new settler. Saxon and Norseman could communicate roughly, since content words were similar - "hors" and "hros" for modern "horse," "waegn" and "vagn" for modern "wagon." Misunderstanding, however, could derive from function words, such as determiners that indicated number- "that hors" meaning one, but "tha hors" meaning two. "If you get enough situations like that," says Shippey, "there is a strong drive towards simplifying the language." (McCrum, 1986) Both groups probably downplayed inflectional endings until, eventually, these were worn away from disuse, and other syntactic devices, such as word order and prepositions, gained in importance.

In effect, Old English underwent the process now styled "pidginization." Modern pidgins are mostly compounds of European and non-European

tongues that arose from trade contacts. The very word "pidgin" is thought by some to be a Chinese corruption of the English word "business." While pidgins have traditionally been scorned as linguistic bastards, crude and limited vehicles of expression, scholars such as Macedo (1991) point up that they can develop into more logical, consistent and concise tools than either parent. Like Old English, they may dispense with grammatical baggage and be transmuted into something easier to learn.

The importance of this is that language change was driven by commercial necessity - a long-running thread through the history of English. It's as recent as the proliferation of "drive-thru" signs, which bid to achieve what fussy authors like George Bernard Shaw have sought for years - simplification of English spelling. How long before "thru" or "lite" vanquish the orthographic dinosaurs that so madden English learners?

## 2. THE NORMAN CONQUEST

Second, consider the linguistic effects of the Norman Conquest. While French, unlike Old Norse, had few content words in common with Anglo-Saxon, there still occurred a great deal of linguistic mingling. The conquerors assumed all positions of power, in court, church and academy, and set about to Frenchify English culture. They vainly (in both senses) supposed that the islanders would welcome a "superior" tongue and civilization. Instead, the English behaved like most conquered peoples, retreating stubbornly into what is now termed "linguistic solidarity." They just kept muttering in Anglo-Saxon, for it was now not only the beloved mother tongue, but a means of

resistance, a badge of identity. As an oral medium, it flowed along imperturbably amongst the lower orders, like a sluggish English river.

Within three centuries, the bid of French to become the tongue of England collapsed; by the 1400's even state and church documents reverted to what was now Middle English. As it had during the Viking invasions, English culture and language proved far more resilient and absorptive than its Celtic predecessor.

Why didn't French prevail? No doubt demographics played a part; the francophone conquerors were never more than a minority of the population. Yet that didn't prevent Spanish and Portugese from becoming the official tongues of Latin America, where European descendants are in the minority. One might argue that French DID succeed, at least in its impact on vocabulary. 10,000 French words are estimated to have entered English outright. These often reflect starkly the class divisions of the era - Saxon farmers raised "sheep," which was eaten by the Norman gentry as "mutton," (Fr. "mouton"); "pigs" became "pork," ("porc") "cows" became "beef," ("boeuf") etc.

A more abundant legacy was the diversion into English of the etymological stream of Latin. Instead of supplanting older words, Latin-derived ones supplemented them, and provided the raw material of future coinages. Old English took "king," "kingly" and "kingdom" from the Germanic root "koenig." After the Conquest, it acquired "royal," "realm," "regal," "regiment," "reign," and a host of others from the Latin root "rex." This led to a wealth of near-synonyms, since each derivative had a slightly different shade (or "nuance,")

of meaning. And it equipped English with suffixes such as "-al," "-ity," "sion," "-ment," etc., which were freely tacked onto native stems. Nowadays, the profusion of synonyms requires students to use a Thesaurus, which means "treasury" and is a reference book unique to English.

So, while the French wave that broke upon Albion's shore left strong traces, it didn't submerge the linguistic firmament. On the contrary, it might actually have deepened pre-existing passions for local autonomy and self-rule. We're so used to thinking of the English as arrogant conquerors that we forget this phase of colonial servitude, this buried racial memory. For three hundred years, the English clung to native accents to express resistance to imposed authority. It was probably no accident that Winston Churchill, when rallying his nation against the Nazi peril, employed an spare eloquence that was almost pure Anglo-Saxon: "We shall fight on the beaches; we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

## 3. STANDARDIZATION

The issue of "standard English" has roiled academic circles in recent years. Usually it is cast as a tool of the ruling class to exclude disadvantaged groups from power, especially blacks and immigrants.

"Standardization," however, is scarcely a recent phenomenon. It has been occurring for at least a third of the fifteen-hundred-year history of English. As a linguistic process, it overtakes most languages once they make the leap into written form. Some consequences of mass literacy will be explored in

a later section, but let us now consider two things: how the standardization of English came about, and how it reflected antipathy toward dictated authority.

To make something standard means trimming variations to a uniform size. In language, this means affirming one pronunciation, or spelling, or grammatic form, as "correct," the standard by which others may be judged. But how is this decision to be made? Traditionally, prestige has accrued to power and wealth, in language as in everything else. "Correct" speech, therefore, was the speech of the elite; in geographic terms, it was the speech of the locale in which political and economic power was concentrated.

This was the case in England, but with a difference. In the 1460's, William Caxton imported from Germany the wondrous new printing presses invented by Gutenberg. He aspired to publish works in English, but was immediately faced with a quandary: which English? His native isle, then as now, featured a profusion of dialects. If he rendered a word in a particular spelling, would it be intelligible to those who pronounced it differently?

Happily, his deliberations received no authoritative input, from government, church or academy. It was a simple, crass business decision, founded on numbers. The largest potential pool of readers lived in the environs of London, so London speech became his criterion for orthography. And thus do modern students of the language grapple with such anomalies as "knight" or "though," which in one small place, a long time ago, were pronounced exactly the way they were written.

The advent of printing did not bring on standardization at a stroke, but it launched the process and fed on itself. Other printers were free to spell differently, in accord with local usage. But by dint of demographic weight, the London version grew predominant. London, of course, had other advantages beside numbers: it was the center of court and commerce, and its speech was more or less shared in the religious and academic power centers of Canterbury, Oxford and Cambridge. Yet it's important to note that its prestige arose naturally, organically, not through any royal *diktat* While the most prestigious form of British speech came to be know as "the King's English," this was never at government instigation.

Spelling remained highly variable into the 1700's, even within single literary works. That cardinal rule of editing - consistency - had not yet taken hold. It was the Augustan Age, hearkening back to classical virtues or order, reason and decorum, that produced the great spelling guide: Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary.* Though not the first English dictionary, and remembered chiefly for its range of scholarship, wealth of example and precision of definition, it was also a major reference for the simple problem of consistent ordering of letters. Even then, the movement toward language uniformity was slow, haphazard, muddling; in short, typically English.

THE BRITISH MODEL

This was in revealing contrast to the development of French, which likewise reflected political evolution. In the 1600's the English were mostly taken up with reducing royal power, culminating in 1688 with the establishment of constitutional monarchy. The larger European trend, however, was in the

opposite direction. In France the movement toward centralized authority climaxed in the reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King, whose splendid strength made France the colossus and terror of Europe.

Along the way to this apogee, there was decreed into existence the French Academy, founded in 1635 to maintain the purity of the language, and establish standards of correct usage. Still today there are occasional news stories on the Academy's futile effort to keep out anglicisms, such as "le weekend," "le parking," "le big-Mac."

In the same era, the Italians and the Spanish established academies. By contrast, Britain never got up an official, authorized body to determine correct usage. One was proposed, by the generally reactionary Jonathan Swift, who deplored the rapid social changes then finding echoes in the language. He spoke for the preservationist impulse and yearned to fit English into a permanent form. He was tellingly rebutted by that other, but more pragmatic, conservative, Samuel Johnson, in the 1755 Preface to his *Dictionary:*

> With this hope however, academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength. (McCrum 1986)

Baugh and Cable summarize the resistance to an academy: "Englishmen have always been moved by a spirit of personal liberty in the use of their

language. A policy of noninterference appeals to them much more than one of arbitrary regulation." (Baugh and Cable, 1957)

Ironically, Johnson achieved to some extent what the official academies attempted, yet in a more characteristic bottom-up British fashion. His effort was a purely commercial one, with no official sanction; its influence in settling the language owed not to royal aegis but to popular acceptance, especially by the rising middle classes anxious to imitate the ways, and speech, of their "betters."

## THE AMERICAN MODEL

The American experience precisely echoed that of the mother country. In the burst of nationalism following the Revolution, John Adams proposed that the Congress create a United States Academy to promote a distinctively American English. He wrote prophetically in 1780:

> English is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the past or French is in the present age. The reason for this is obvious, because the increasing population in America, and their universal connection and correspondence with all nations will, aided by the influence of England in the world, whether great or small, force their language into general use . . ." (McCrum 1986)

Yet significantly, his proposal for government promotion of English was turned down by Congress; he was referred instead to the private sector, to individual pressure groups like the Philological Society.

As in England, the goal of uniformity was advanced more through the private efforts of a lone lexicographer. This time it was Noah Webster, a lesser scholar but better salesman than Dr. Johnson, who entered the textbook business when the Revolution cut off the normal supply of English-produced materials. The public proved eager to put away British models and celebrate its own distinctive language. Webster published first a grammar, then his famous *American Speller*, which for a generation was second only to the Bible in sales.

Webster sought explicitly to promote not just uniform spelling but also pronunciation, and some linguists credit his influence on education for the relative homogeneity of American accents. Whether in Massachusetts, Georgia or Ohio, children at the onset of literacy learned to spell and pronounce with a common technique - a teacher would lead a choral chant, breaking each word into syllables, enunciating first the letters, then the phonetic sound of the component parts. This had a leveling effect on intonation, still evident in the British and American versions of a word like "controversy." The British say "con-TRO-ver-sy" - this reflects both a greater rootedness in history (the Latin original also stresses the second syllable), and normal language dynamism (the compressing effect of long usage, seen in the swallowing of the first, third and fourth syllables). By contrast, Americans say "CON-tro-ver-sy" - we give slightly more weight to the first syllable, but generally plod through the word, enunciating each part with approximate equivalence.



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This may have been a quirky reflection of the democratic ethos - just as "all men are created equal," so all syllables of a word have an inalienable right to be uttered with equal force. But more likely it was driven by pedagogic, and ultimately economic, necessity. Americans faced a challenge different from Britain, that of binding different language and ethnic groups into a single national identity. Britons were born, but Americans were made. When Webster's spelling technique was first implemented, most students may have been of British descent, but that was changing fast. Therefore the public schools became frankly assimilationist, striving first to render more uniform the language of native speakers, and second to induct immigrants into the same language community.

Two things should be noted about this movement toward a standard American English. First, it was conscious and purposeful. In calling for a flattened pronunciation and rationalized spelling (it was Webster's *Dictionary* of 1806 that successfully changed "labour" into "labor," "centre" into "center"), Webster anticipated Henry Ford. He applied to language and language education something of the theory of interchangeable parts. Just as men could produce more cars when every part and every tool was of standard issue, so they could communicate better if the natural differences of accent and spelling were worn away. This made work less interesting and language less varied, but everyone got richer as a result, and that's what they preferred.

The second, and more crucial, factor is that while standardization was deliberate, it was by and large a voluntary phenomenon, not one pursued through the coercive power of the central state. (The exception being Native

Americans, part of whose tragedy is to have come under federal, not local, jurisdiction.) Education was from the first considered primarily a local responsibility. It was local school boards who chose texts, and if they gravitated toward a common language standard, they did so in pursuit of economic advancement, not on orders from Washington. This bias is seen today in wariness over proposals for a nationwide system of testing.

On a final note, the Anglo-American tradition of language policy sheds light on one current issue - the establishment of English as the official language of the United States. During the 1980's there were several amendments to the Constitution proposed in Congress, and some popular agitation, on behalf of Official English. This resulted partly from anxiety over the immigrant surge of the last few years, especially Hispanic; but more in reaction to the rise of bilingual education. Whatever the virtues of the latter, it lacks a wide popular constituency and was only achieved through federal mandate.

Yet the amendments all failed, and it was quite in the American grain that they did so. English remains, at the national level at least, an unofficial and voluntary standard. Far better to trust market forces and public self-interest to bring about the blessings of a common tongue. As Jean Grosjean notes in his book *Bilingualism*, the United States has achieved more language unity by neglect than other countries do by stringent efforts.

4. LOAN-WORDS

As a final aspect of linguistic wealth, consider a striking parallel between the dynamics of capitalism and of lexical growth. The word "capitalism" derives

from "capital," which properly highlights the role of investment in starting or expanding a business. But where do you get this extra cash, this capital? Few save it up; most have to borrow. It was the refinement of banking practices in the late Middle Ages, particularly of lending, that laid the foundation of modern capitalism.

Why did banking and business flourish in England, so permeating the national character that Napoleon contemptuously called it "a nation of shopkeepers"? Various reasons, but not least that among the "rights of Englishmen" wrested from the ruling classes over the centuries was the sanctity of property - the freedom from confiscation later enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. This laid a secure foundation for entrepreneurial habits of risk-taking, especially the expansion of businesses overseas.

Britain's island position compelled it to face outward toward the sea, to develop a certain international-mindedness that balanced out its insular conservatism. Thus its imperial expansion unfolded differently from that of other nations; usually, its traders preceded its troops. The first American settlements, such as Jamestown, Plimoth and Boston, were sponsored not by the Crown, but by private groups known as "merchant adventurers." Even the Jewel of Empire, India, was attained piecemeal under the aegis of the East India Company, which only later sought buttressing by military power. This prompted Churchill's famous judgment that the British Empire was the only one ever acquired by accident.

The English language reflects a similar paradox: internal stability, yet great openness to foreign influence. We have already traced the lexical growth

owing to Danish and Norman invasions. The subsequent infusions were happier, because voluntary. Indeed, just as English bankers plunged readily into the international transfer of capital, so English speakers availed themselves of language growth via borrowing. Of course all languages borrow, but English must count as a kleptomaniac. Jesperson, in his *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, estimates that a full 80% of modern English words originated as loans and declares, " . . . the whole history of the English language may be described from one point of view as one chain of borrowings." (Jespersen 1938)

Baugh and Cable contrast this fact with the case of German: "Instead of making new words chiefly by the combination of existing elements, as German does, English has shown a marked tendency to go outside her own linguistic resources and borrow from other languages. In the course of centuries English has built up an unusual capacity for assimilating outside elements." (Baugh and Cable, 1957) One consequence of this, they note, is that English presents some familiarity to any speaker of a Romantic or German tongue and is thus more learnable.

So, English avoids two pitfalls: first, the agglutinative tendency of languages like German, which gives rise to long and indigestible coinages such as "Generalstaatsverordnetenversammlungen" (cited in Mark Twain's essay, "The Awful German Language." He describes such terms as "compounds with the hyphens left out . . . hardly legitimate words, but rather combinations of words, and the inventor of them ought to have been killed.")

Second, it shuns the purist attempt to "nativize" foreign terms that might bring cultural dilution, i.e., the doomed French rendering of "computer" as "ordinateur."

This receptivity was deepened and extended by American English, in proportion to its broader ethnic make-up. Even tributary streams that have declined in number of speakers, such as Native Americans, have left a large linguistic trace: "chipmunk," "moose," "raccoon," "skunk," and myriad place-names. Each new immigrant wave has added its store - Dutch "brandy," German "kindergarten," West African "banjo," Italian "broccoli," Spanish "canyon," Yiddish "schmooz," ad infinitum.

In conclusion, English has treated vocabulary a little as its speakers have treated money - keep it moving, keep it growing, and don't worry too much where it came from. Both systems of expansion, financial and lexical, have borrowing as the mainspring; but this borrowing is not a zero-sum game. Indeed, there's a "golden goose" quality about successful capitalism, for an initial investment often multiplies itself and leaves both lender and borrower better off. Likewise, "loan-words" never cost the lender anything, but add to the general store. Spanish gave us a host of geographic terms - "arroyo," "ravine," "mesa" - but Spanish still has them. Likewise, English bequeathed "lunch" to Mexican Spanish, which expanded it to "loncheria"; yet English-speakers still get their noon meal.

## CHAPTER 2 - EGALITARIANISM

Are all men *really* created equal? It's an unspoken, rarely-challenged premise of our American outlook. The words are Jefferson's, but the idea may be traced back at least as far as Mt. Sinai. There, the teachings of Genesis entered the Western tradition in a lasting way: "So God created man in his own image." (Gen. 1:27)

This belief had profound implications for social structure. To wit - if I reflect the divine nature as much as you, why do you have higher status? Why are you dominating me? Why should Egyptian overlords treat Hebrew slaves as no better than beasts? Why should any class, or race, or gender claim superiority to any other?

The imputation of divine parentage to every individual was a radical idea. It left the Hebrew conscience intensely attuned to issues of social justice. And when Hebrew ideas, via Christianity, came to dominate Western civilization, this radical notion began a long outworking into political and legal institutions.

The progress was slow because the idea of equality, on the face of it, is absurd. People are born with traits that are manifestly unequal, from size to strength to speed to intelligence. In society they sort themselves out, with the strong, swift, clever minority usually coming to dominate the weak, slow, dull majority. This is the "natural" state of things, which classical civilization took to me immutable; thus the fury with which Rome persecuted the new Jewish heresy that proved so attractive to slaves and women. And

thus do modern hellenophiles like Nietzsche come to loathe Christianity, exalt inequality, and lay the ground for Naziism.

Our Western heritage is in large measure a long tension between two outlooks - Greek and Hebrew, rational Athens and mystical Jerusalem. One grounds us in life as it is; the other beckons us to life as it ought to be. One accepts inequality, and reveres the rare gifts of genius; the other refuses to be bound by it, and strives to release within each humble soul the latent creative potential.

Though both Greece and Rome experimented with political forms that seemed democratic, it was only after a millenium of Christendom that such forms took root. And like it or not, that occurred chiefly within the English-speaking countries. Many societies groped in the same direction, yet it was Britain and America who got it on paper first. Prior to that, they wrote it in blood, through ferocious struggles of tribe against tribe, native against invader, lord against lord, parliament against king, and colony against motherland.

The egalitarian ideal was so pervasive, even two hundred years ago, that Jefferson could preface his great claim with the words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." Well, they were self-evident if you believed them; not so self-evident if you didn't. Yet enough of his compatriots did that his words have sunk deep into the English-speaking mind, and now into global consciousness. They are one example of how language and culture interpenetrate and shape each other.

Let us consider three more instances of this - the loss of the informal second-person pronouns "thou," "thy" and "thee" in the 1600's; the way in which honorifics reflected changing class structure in the 1700's; and the extent to which the democratic ethos is manifested in slang.

1. WHERE ART "THOU"?

By the 1600's, as noted above, England stood in the vanguard of Europe with respect to the formal devolution and decentralization of political power. Other nations were still struggling to attain national unity under a strong ruler; England had done so centuries before, and was now in the process of rolling it back. In 1649 Charles I was beheaded, and after an interval of military dictatorship, the rising middle classes gained ascendancy through a strengthened Parliament and vitiated monarchy.

The causes of this massive and reverberant upheaval are complex, but one should note the religious factor. The English civil war was part of the larger clash of faiths roiling Europe after the Reformation. It was sparked by Puritan reformers, seeking a new Zion of individuals accountable directly to God. For if Roman spiritual authority was to be cast aside, it followed that Stuart temporal authority was also suspect. If equal before God, then equal before man.

James I fought this by loudly asserting the "divine right of kings," but his autocratic ways undercut him. Some dissenters despaired of England and fled to Massachusetts; their visions of Zion, of a perfect "City on a Hill," still grip our national psyche. Others stayed to fight it out. Among these were

some groups explicitly aiming to overturn the class structure, with names like the "Diggers" and the "Levellers." Of common origin, they formed the bulk of Cromwell's armies; and while they were marginalized after the Restoration of Charles II, their egalitarian fervor left its stamp.

NO RESPECT

Language, sociolinguistics tells us, closely reflects power relations within society. One means by which this is accomplished is the second-person pronoun of address. Societies that are highly stratified and elaborately polite, such as Japan, may have multiple forms of address, depending on the relative status of speaker and hearer. Most European languages have at least two - "tu" and "vous," in French, "tu" and "usted" in Spanish, "du" and "Sie" in German (nominative forms).

Then there's English. We say "you," regardless of whom we address. Yet this was not always the case. According to Baugh and Cable, the use of "you" was preceded in Old English by "thou-thy-thee" to mark singular and "ye-your-you" to mark plural. Formality was not an issue. That changed following the Norman Conquest: "In the thirteenth century the singular forms were used among familiars and in addressing children or persons of inferior rank, while the plural forms began to be used as a mark of respect in addressing a superior . . . the practice seems to have been suggested by French usage in court circles." (Baugh and Cable, 1957)

When French influence began fading in the 1400's, so did this distinction. Yet it was retained in written English at least through the Elizabethan era.

Most modern speakers associate these forms with Shakespeare ("Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" 1597) or the King James Bible ("Thou art worthy, O Lord." 1611). By the 1700's, however, the written trace disappears. The only exceptions are dialectical use in rural Britain, and religious rhetoric, notably the deliberate retention of "thee-thy-thou" among the Quakers.

Is it coincidence that this marker of class distinction withered during the century of class upheaval? Of course its use to indicate status was artificial to begin with, a French import in conflict with indigenous habit. Therefore the loss of "thou" may be seen as a reversion to tradition. Yet might there have been some deliberate shunning of a pronoun used for "persons of inferior rank" by the egalitarian reformers of the 1600's?

It's interesting that what survived was the form meant for "superiors," as if everyone had been promoted up the class ladder. It's more interesting that the Quakers, known for rabid egalitarianism (they had female clergy) as well as for pacifism and religious tolerance, went the other way. The American Heritage Dictionary notes that "thou" was used not only with familiars and inferiors, but for God. Were the Quakers going even one better, addressing all persons with the form reserved for the deity? Were they asserting in grammar the Reformation emphasis on personal familiarity and direct accountability toward God?

Of course the exclusive use of "you" hardly erased class distinctions among English speakers; we have other devices, such as titles and intonation, to mark inevitable differences in status. And its loss as an indicator of the

plural is downright inconvenient (though compensated in good bottom-up fashion by such dialectical variants as Southern "y'all" and urban working-class "youse.")

Yet think what this means to an English learner. Learners always hope for word-by-word equivalents to the familiar units of their first language. Suppose a student from some more stratified, hierarchical society than ours (which means from just about anyplace) is grappling with pronouns. He learns "you," then wants to know the respectful version. We tell him that there is none. But how do you address your social superiors, he asks? By the means mentioned above, we say, but not by pronoun.

Now, the student might see this as just boorish and undiscerning; or he might like it. It might challenge his prior language-shaped view of reality, in which status distinctions are clear and immutable. He might savor the idea of ruler and ruled being addressed in the same way.

2. HONORIFICS

Ladies and gentlemen among my readers: are you? That is, are you really "ladies and gentlemen?" Regardless of your manners, the answer is yes. But this honorific is probably a recent acquisition. Unless you are descended from English nobility, you have inherited these titles, along with "Mr.," "Mrs.," and "Miss," from your betters.

When English settlers first hit the cold shores of Massachusetts, they were not all ladies and gentlemen. Despite sharing a common faith which had led

them to emigrate, they retained sharp class distinctions. A minority were genuine members of the nobility; they led the Puritan movement in England, and initially played a similar role here. The majority, however, were of lower- or middle-class background and had to make do with lesser titles: "Goodman" for married men (as in Hawthorne's Puritan tale, "Young Goodman Browne"), "Goodwife," for their women (sometimes shortened to "Goodie" as with the character Goodie Proctor of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*).

In the 1600's, here and in England, "Mr." (abbreviated from Mister) was reserved for men of substance. It was a weakened form of "Master" and came both from the French model, "maistre," and from the Old English, and ultimately Latin, "magister." The AHD defines it chiefly as "a man having control over the actions of another or others," and the title "Mr." is still used formally for certain ranks in the military. "Mrs.," derives from the female form, "Mistress," one definition of which is "a woman owning an animal or, formerly, a slave" as well as "who has ultimate control over something."

In short, these titles indicated a superior place in the social scale, and a range of freedom now caught, perhaps, in the vague but ubiquitous ideal of "empowerment." How then did they ever settle on the likes of us? Why did the term "goodman" not survive into the 1700's?

We have discussed already the political currents in England which challenged traditional class structure. Those currents were magnified in the American colonies, where the task of taming a wilderness had a solvent effect on traditional hierarchies. Inhabitants still sorted themselves into

classes, but status depended less on birth than on skill at wealth-gathering. Still today, the American class structure is so fluid as to be unsettling; each new generation can fall just as quickly as its ancestors rose.

In language, this led to the universal currency of titles once indicative of superiority; just as each American was addressed as "you," so he now styled himself "Mr." These trends hardened after the Revolution, when everything smacking of British nobility was denigrated. Even our chief of state was to have no edge in title - he would be referred to not as "His Excellency" of "My Lord," but simply "Mr. President."

Aside from this decision, however, the honorific inflation in the United States was never deliberate. It stands in contrast to the conscious effort of French Jacobins to abolish the title "Monsieur," (literally, My Lord), and replace it with "Citoyen" or Citizen; but that didn't stick. In 1917 the Bolsheviks likewise tried to impose "tovarisch" or Comrade as the universal moniker. Such prescriptive, top-down efforts to effect social change via language sometimes succeed, but sometimes don't. It remains to be seen if the comparable campaign of "non-sexist" English ("Ms.," "waitperson," "s/he," etc.) will prevail in English.

Over the course of democratizing centuries, this change has spread to other lands; now the lowliest Frenchman or Spaniard or German is "Monsieur," "Senor," or "Herr." But the breakthrough into upward mobility, by which we all became ladies and gentlemen, was initially American. Appreciate this the next time you use a public restroom.

3. SLANG

If we picture a language as a living tree, how does it renew itself? In part, by slang. Slang acts as the little buds bursting out each spring, expanding into leaves, bringing nutriment and beauty for a season, then falling into mulchy oblivion. Yet while most slang words vanish, a few survive; like the nutriment entered into the tree, a few gain currency as "respectable" language in a way that mocks the prejudice against slang in general.

Let us ponder three questions: Why do people make slang? Which social spheres are the most productive of it? And how might its place in modern English reflect a democratic ethos?

MAKE IT NEW

First the sociolinguistic mechanism behind it: "Slang results from an instinctive desire for freshness and novelty of expression." (Baugh and Cable, 1957) That is, slang is the verbal equivalent of fashion. People get tired of the same clothes or hairstyle or words, and want a change. The new version gives pleasure to both speaker and hearer; it adds to the spice of life. Consider a recent entrant into the American vernacular - "He's toast," - meaning, "His career is over, he's headed downward." It's vivid, evoking the image of something burnt and dark and stiffened. And it's fresh, imparting a spontaneous delight at first hearing.

I first encountered it in a *Newsweek* account (Nov. 4, 1992) of the Presidential campaigns; after several Clinton victories in the Democratic primaries, an aide gloated with regard to rival Bob Kerrey, "He's toast." Shortly after, the local Boston newspaper *TAB* had a headline referring to our Republican governor in light of Democratic gains in the legislature: "Is Weld Toast?" A couple of years ago, they might have phrased it, "Is Weld History?"; a few years prior to that, "Is Weld Dead Meat?" But now it's time for something new.

The phrase may not last out the year, but its usage by political and media elites shows another function of slang - topicality. By employing it, we mark that we are up-to-date, with-it, cutting-edge, and, implicitly, ahead of our rivals. Of course this counts more in societies that are dynamic, competitive and fluid in structure. At the opposite end of the spectrum are static, backward-looking societies like ancient Egypt or Imperial China; one cannot picture an aide to the Son of Heaven seeking favor by trotting out the latest slang.

UP AND OUT

This brings us to the second question - which social spheres are most productive of slang? Robert L. Chapman, in his *American Slang*, notes a general pattern - most slang originates at the bottom and floats up. That is, the most avid coiners of new phrases are out-groups traditionally lower down on the social scale - gangsters, racial minorities, teen-agers, athletes, entertainers, cowboys, members of the military, drug-users, homosexuals.(Chapman 1987)

One motive for making new words is simple self-protection, since they enable members of the group to communicate in ways that the majority can't understand. The slang is intentionally obscure, such as Mafia references to the "family." Once the code is broken and the phrase is adopted by a fascinated public, however, the out-group must produce something new.

This pressure for ever-fresher slang is heightened by the phenomenon of mass literacy. Slang is almost exclusively oral in origin, and in many cultures it probably has little chance of achieving the permanency of print. But mass literacy begets a mass media - newspapers, magazines, books, movies, TV and radio shows that compete hungrily for public attention. To do so, they not only use the lastest phrases; they must also cast their beams into realms of society that might previously have been comfortably dark. They must investigate and expose, appealing to public anger (at organized crime, drug-dealers, gangs) or sympathy (minority groups, migrant workers) or simple curiosity (surfers, "Valley girls," professional wrestlers).

In the process, they provide a conveyor-belt for jargon and slang, simultaneously bringing it to the thrilled notice of readers and compelling the out-groups to be more creative. When teenagers could call a thing "unradical!" and mystify their elders, they were happy; but once the phrase entered the wider culture via *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or other topical movies, it lost its savor. Yet language is continuously enriched by this upward movement, this percolation of the fresh and vigorous into the higher reaches of standard discourse. It has an equalizing effect, imparting a certain legitimacy to cultural expressions of those on the bottom.

VOX POPULI

This brings us to our final point, that the prominence of slang in modern English reflects a deeper democratic ethos. Such a claim must be put cautiously, for by its very nature, slang defies comparative analysis, either between languages or between eras within a language. As Baugh and Cable say: "It is dangerous to generalize about the relative prominence of slang in this and former times. But it would seem as though the role which it plays today [1957] is greater than it has been at certain times in the past . . . to judge by the conversation of plays and popular fiction." (Baugh and Cable 1957)

This last insight is key. We noted the zeal with which modern mass media disseminate slang, but that reflects an acceptance among the educated that is relatively recent. A good gauge of slang's evolving status is provided by dictionary definitions. Webster in 1828 called slang "low, vulgar, unmeaning language." The *Oxford Dictionary* of 1911 was more objective: "Language of a highly colloquial type, below the level of standard educated speech . . ." By 1969, the *American Heritage Dictionary* had mostly dispensed with a vertical viewpoint: "The nonstandard vocabulary of a given culture or subculture, consisting typically of arbitrary and often ephemeral coinages and figures of speech characterized by spontaneity and raciness."

In short, slang as a linguistic category has, in the last couple centuries, enjoyed an upward mobility similar to that of the English-speaking common

man, as described above. And just as class structure has proved more fluid on this side of the Atlantic, some observers see the place of slang as a point of difference between British and American English. Since colonial days, glamor-minded Americans have aped British models, in diction and accent. Yet the opposite has occurred, with some members of the English upper-classes zealously adopting American imports and praising the "slanginess" of our speech. Raymond Chandler, the well-born British mystery author transplanted to Los Angeles, wrote in 1958: "I have had a lot of fun with the American language; it has fascinating idioms, is constantly creative, very much like the English of Shakespeare's time, its slang and argot are wonderful..." (McCrum 1986)

I submit that the "contant creativeness" detected by Chandler and others results from the same dynamic mix of classes, ethnic groups and races that also underlies our prosperity. In a free-market economy, all citizens are pressed to compete in selling their labor; this spurs an continuous, fermenting creativity as new products or services are devised. And it has a levelling effect - some people obviously start out with inherited advantages, but unless individual talents are developed afresh, they will fall behind, and other, hungrier rivals will push ahead. As economic power is diffused, political power too comes to rest on a broader and broader base, with former "outs" becoming "ins" (and some "ins" becoming "outs").

This same trend is seen in the upward percolation of slang. One instance is the influx into American English from the Yiddish spoken by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. At one time, use of these terms could probably incite social prejudice; but now, how many non-Jewish Americans

unself-consciously speak of "schlock" art, or "schmoozing" with friends, or doing something in a "kosher" way, or acting like a "schmuck"?

OUT OF AFRICA

Every immigrant group has contributed some slang, in addition to simple loan-words. Perhaps the most pervasive influence has come from those lowest-down on the social scale of all - African-Americans. For decades, students of mass culture have noted the profound impact on American music of African-derived musical forms. Now similar attention is being paid to the impact on English, for like music, language is a highly democratic property.

Perhaps no example better illustrates the trend of upward mobility than the very term coined for egregious examples of it - "Yuppie." "Yuppie" came to public consciousness in 1984, to describe the supporters of presidential candidate Gary Hart; it was explained as deriving from an acronym for "young, urban (or upwardly-mobile) professional." It soon gained a connotation of "ostentatious parvenu" and reflected wonderfully our ambivalence about social class, since virtually no one would admit to being one.

"Yuppie," like the biblical Abraham, proved a father of many nations; soon it spawned "buppies" (black urban professional), "guppies" (gay urban professional), even "frumpies" (formerly radical urban professional, i.e. sell-out). No doubt there were others, mercifully short-lived; most were coined by journalists and so had little root in popular usage. Yet the popularity of

"yuppie" owed to more than our national predilection for acronyms. At the phonemic level, it played off the popularity of an earlier term, "Yippie."

"Yippie" emerged in 1968 at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, as banner for a group of protesters - the Youth International Party. Of course the full name was contrived in order to rhyme with "hippie." The "hippies" had made a splash in the 1966 Summer of Love in San Francisco, but the term had been used for several years to describe the bohemian subculture. The hippies were "hip," that is, sophisticated, stylish, "cool." As an adjective, "hip" made the cross-over into white parlance from the black subculture of the Fifties, transmuting out of "hep." In prior decades, jazz musicians (mostly black) were known as "hepcats."

But where did the "hep/hip" sound come from? In meaning it bears no relation to words derived from Anglo-Saxon "hip" (body part) or Greek "hippo-" (horse). One theory is that it came from a West African language Wolof, whose word for "man who is aware" is "hipicat." (Chapman 1987) It may have survived the Middle Passage and remained in black English as a vestige of African tradition. We may never know for sure, but how provocative to think that a sound once spoken in equatorial villages has metamorphosed into a term of abuse for Wall Street financiers.

There are other Americanisms of mysterious origin, including perhaps the mostly universally recognized word of English -"okay." The word for "yes" in another West African language is "hauke." Might this have entered into the pidgin by which slave and slave-owner had to communicate? It's more plausible than the standard but dubious tale that "O.K." was an abbreviation

for "all correct," rendered by an illiterate sign-painter "oll korrect." Of course, in a day of political correctness there is a tendency to overstate African contributions to American culture, but the sheer demographics argue for a major influence - at the Revolution, 1 in 5 inhabitants were black slaves, and in parts of the South, 1 in 2.

In the 1940's, black bandleader Cab Calloway made a satiric "Jive Talk Dictionary" that suggests the reach of African-derived slang - terms like "chick" for young female, "cat" for young male, "groovy" for fine, "mellow" for relaxed, "square" for unhip, "hype" for talk something up. Many readers would associate these terms with the Sixties drug culture, which points to a part of their appeal - as a form of protest against traditional culture. One facet of the peculiar racial dynamic of the United States is the receptivity of younger, liberal-minded whites to expressions of black culture. From the days of "abolitionism" to modern rap and hip-hop, there has been no surer way for white youth to irritate their elders than by talking black. I myself had an aunt who would chant Cab Calloway's signature phrase, "Heidy-ho!", purely to vex her Republican businessman father.

In any case, the absorption of black slang into American English reflects the latter's unusual permeability and inclusiveness. The otherwise sensible Samuel Johnson deplored this tendency - "the American dialect is a tract of corruption to which every language widely diffused must always be exposed." (McCrum 1986)

Viewed more benignly, we may say that just as various ethnic groups were melting into a common national identity, so their coinages were streaming

into the hodge-podge American language, with no one taking much notice of pedigree. Here is an unwritten Constitutional right - any citizen, regardless of status, may coin a slang phrase; and if it finds a new niche of meaning or strikes the public fancy, it may one day attain to the grand status of dictionary definition. From rags to riches, from bottom to top, from "hipi" to "yuppie," from "low, vulgar, unmeaning language" to "standard educated speech" - up slang bubbles, bringing freshness, tang and vigor to the language.

## CHAPTER 3 - INDIVIDUALISM

As a final cultural trait, consider individualism. All these values blend together and are hard to tease apart. This one bears on our very identity - who are we? Why do we behave as we do? Are we discrete and unique individuals, blank slates at birth who may develop in utterly distinctive ways? Or are we members of a group, sharing group characteristics that to some extent pre-determine how we think and act?

Of course we're all both. Moreover, we may have multiple group identities - of race, of ethnic group, of nationality, of religion, of gender. Our lives are lived out in tension between the claims of the group and the impulses of the self, between tribal tradition and individual conscience. This condition is universal, yet there would seem to be some cultures that extend more tolerance to individual difference.

In historic context, the group identity is primary, just as oral language is primary, providing the base upon which written forms are built. "Individualism" is a fairly recent cultural value, and a fragile one. Indeed, the global upsurge of ethnic feeling - what may be termed "groupism" - is a troubling feature of the modern scene. Bosnians who dwelt as neighbors are

de-individualized, categorized by wider ancestral identity, and abused accordingly.

Yet the hardy plant of individualism keeps pressing up against the crust. To survive, it requires not only attitudes of tolerance but solid protection contained in written codes of law. In this respect, England has led the way. British history, to be sure, is stained with racism, religious intolerance and exploitation of colonial subjects; yet its legal system commands wide admiration for protection of minority rights. Indeed; refugees have for centuries flocked to English-speaking nations not just from economic motives but for the simple condition of safety. As I write, Haitians risk life and limb to escape a black nation for a mostly white and reputedly racist one.

Why the paradox? It may be simply a case of time-lag. The "rights of Englishmen" wrested over the centuries from predatory rulers entered into a corpus of written law. That body of law has accreted slowly, organically, but sturdily, like an oak tree; for it is a written code rooted in ancient local custom, conservative, backward-looking, mindful of precedent.

Yet because precedent is revered, it can be cited by those not enjoying full protection of the law. Its ideals can be appealed to by aggrieved colonials or racial minorities. From Samuel Adams to Mahatma Gandhi, foes of British rule struck sympathetic chords by claiming only those personal freedoms enjoyed by the English themselves. Gandhi, in a candid moment, allowed that his non-violent campaign for independence would only have succeeded within the British Empire; Stalin, for example, would have crushed him like an insect.

So, this deep-rooted regard for rule of law safeguards individualism. It is probably no accident that the British are regarded worldwide, even by their enemies, as great eccentrics; they are ever willing to thwart social norms and act as they please, confident of protection from the coercive power of the state. And what is true of the British is generally truer of Americans - we are England squared. This is seen in our greater stringency in protecting press freedom, for example.

How might individualism show up in the English language? We will discuss three instances, two fairly simple and one complex. The first, appropriately, is the first-person singular pronoun - "I." The second is the mounting number of vocabulary items dealing with "self." The third is the profound interrelation of individualism and literacy.

1. ME, MYSELF AND I

What word probably recurs in informal English discourse more than any other? I nominate "I." It might be edged out by function words such as "the" or "of," but not by other content words. We use it often, we put it first in our sentences, and, uniquely, we capitalize it. Why?

Its frequent usage is in part a consequence of the decayed verb inflections, discussed in Chapter 1. When Middle English ceased marking person in its verb endings, it became necessary to do so with pronouns. Whereas a Romance language such as Spanish can say who is "working," for example, with a simple inflection, "Trabajamos," English must precede the verb with

"We" or "You" or "I." Yet might this also reflect a psychological predisposition to identify the speaker?

Consider the contrasting example of Japanese. It has even fewer inflections to mark person in the verb than English; to be precise, none. The statement "ikimasu" can mean "I go," or "you go" or "he goes," etc. Logically, it should depend heavily on pronouns to indicate who is speaking. But in fact these are downplayed. English-speakers learning Japanese (I am one) instinctively want to begin sentences with the equivalent of "I" or "my," but it isn't done; the person of the speaker is generally understood. By contrast, some Japanese learning English testify to embarrassment at having to name themselves so often; it seems forward, impolite, egotistical. John Condon, in his cross-cultural tract *With Respect to the Japanese* reports that students there sometimes claim to "feel more individualistic" when speaking English. Their own language has "at least ten words . . . that might be equivalent to the English 'I,' and another ten for 'you' depending upon a particular relationship. Relative age, status, role, familiarity with each other, whether or not both are men or both women or man and woman together will all influence how Japanese talk."

In short, the language reflects the stratification of Japanese society and the cultural value of subordination of self to others. Condon quotes another Japanese on the limitations of English in this respect: "English is like algebra - hypothetical, impersonal, practical, modern, direct . . . a perfect language for lawyers, but not for getting to know each other." (Condon 1984)

The well-nurtured anglophone ego is seen as well in our placement of "I." We not only use it often, but we put it at the forefront. The branch of linguistics called pragmatics claims that, as a rule, the most important information of a sentence comes first. If so, English speakers are trained up from infancy to a profound egocentricism. Anyone who has observed the language development of small children is struck by their early mastery of possessive pronouns - "MINE!" "MY!" Psychologists assure us that such utter egocentricity is normal and universal. It remains for the larger culture to constrain such an attitude, and one means of this is language. Some, like Japanese, may do so by downplaying references to self; others, like English, seem to flaunt them.

How else do we explain the written convention of capitalizing "I"? Even its progenitor, German "ich," does not enjoy such a privilege. It serves no obvious typographic purpose, as far as avoiding confusion with the lower-case form. Indeed, the poet e.e. cummings achieved public notice precisely by using "i" instead of the normal form. His rationale was gnomic but revealing: "it is because i am so unimportant, and because i am so important."

Cummings, or cummings, and his many disciples among pretentious adolescents, got it right: capitalization is a device for showing importance. English employs it for proper nouns, which mark specificity (or individuality). We speak of "parks" but of "Yellowstone National Park." We don't capitalize generic titles, like "the judge," but we do so when it is attached to a name - "Judge Rehnquist." The only exception to this is "the President," reserved for our supreme office-holder.

And somewhere along the line of Anglo-American history, the same impulse to show importance worked upon the first person singular pronoun. It has been absorbed unconsciously by generations of English-speaking schoolchildren, who learn to elevate the symbol for their "selves" just as they will that of the American chief of state.

2. SELF

Those who believe Western civilization to be in decline were highly gratified by the appearance in the late Seventies of a new magazine, entitled *Self*. It soon adorned nearly every supermarket check counter in the country, and seemed fresh proof and perfect symbol of the anarchic individualism that, since the Sixties, has challenged more traditional American values.

Be that as it may, the magazine's creators, obviously no fools, were following a long-term linguistic trend within English. Self sells. "Self" derives from Germanic "selb," and ultimately from the Indo-European root "seu." (*AHD 1969*) Interestingly, its ancient meaning included "referring to the social group as an entity, [we our-]selves"; that is, to show collective identity, not individual. In Old English it served simply as the reflexive pronoun for actions committed by the speaker to the speaker: "He burned himself."

Thus it remained until the modern era, when it began to be appropriated first as a noun, then a prefix. Deep German philosophers of the 1600's spoke of "selbheit," reflecting the new post-Renaissance conception of individual identity. This made its first appearance in English in 1649, as "selfhood," defined by the OED [1973] as "that which in a person is

intrinsically he; the ego; a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness." Shortly after, Descartes revolutionized philosophy with his effort to root all knowledge in self-awareness: "I think, therefore I am."

Obviously, this was a European-wide trend, reflected in the historical philology of all Western languages. Yet consider the record within English. Only one "self" word appears before the 1600's: "Self-assurance" in 1595. Yet the next century, discussed above with regard to political and religious upheaval, saw a flood of coinages: "self-knowledge" 1613; "self-made" 1615; "selfish" 1640; "self-interest" 1649 (provocatively, the same year that King Charles I was executed); "self-confidence" 1653; "self-esteem," that modern *summum bonum* 1657; "self-centered" 1676; and the political ideal associated with Woodrow Wilson, "self-determination" 1683.

The following century saw fewer additions, but some had a political tinge: "self-control" 1711; "self-government" 1734; "self-support" 1774. In the 1800's, these were joined by ones with an increasingly American flavor, such as the topic of Emerson's famous essay: "self-reliance" 1837; or ones adumbrating the influence of psychology on modern thinking: "self-realization" 1876.

Nowadays the proliferation continues; as one example, consider the prominence within any bookstore of the section styled "Self-help." These offer manuals by means of which readers may repair their psyches or their lawn-mowers; learn new languages or cuisines; make spiritual breakthroughs or wise investments; and all is achieved individually.

circumventing the usual reliance on schools, hospitals or other collective arrangements.

Of course this phenomenon transcends any particular culture; "self-consciousness" is at the heart of modernity worldwide. The historical philology of numerous languages would probably reveal a comparable trace to the growth of "self" words in English. Yet I suspect such vocabulary items have been helping to etch self-awareness deeply into the minds of English-speakers for a long time. How deeply I realized in 1973, when I started teaching English in West Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer. As a standard ploy, I tried to get my students to practice calendar items by telling me their birthdates. But they didn't know their birthdates, since their cultural tradition didn't consider a chronological reckoning of birth to be of much importance. It was rather refreshing.

3. LITERACY

Two questions: what is literacy? And how does its acquisition affect consciousness, specifically the growth of individuality? As a category, "literacy" has become something of a political football in recent years, its meaning stretched like taffy to cover ideological agendas. On the right are proponents of "cultural literacy," who use it metaphorically to mean a set canon of common knowledge, the imparting of which should be the chief end of education. On the left are those who equate it with class consciousness: becoming "literate" means viewing society in purely political terms, and being spurred, or "empowered," to alter the balance in more egalitarian directions.

The latter view can lead to some extraordinary historical judgments, such as the claim that Aristotle was not "literate" because he affirmed the elitist social structure of ancient Greece. Yet broadly speaking, there is truth in the view that mass literacy begets democratization. The free, rich countries of today tend to be those with the highest rates of literacy.

Whatever the political ramifications, let us begin with a literal definition of literacy; to wit, the ability to read and write. One may slice this finer and finer, with regard to what one reads, when one reads it, who teaches it, etc. Yet for the purposes of this essay, I would focus on the particular historical circumstances in which certain people began to read and write.

In the English experience, interestingly, both current definitions can find some vindication. Mass literacy in the 1500's was driven by public hunger for access to the canon of all canons - the Bible. Yet its long-term effect was precisely the diffusion of political power, the emergence into self-conscious life of the mute laboring masses, that is sought by modern literacy liberationists.

Let us first examine the data about literacy in the early modern era. David Cressy, in *Literacy and the Social Order*, notes that precise figures are hard to come by, but that "a projection back to the reign of Henry VII would find perhaps 90% of Englishmen illiterate at the turn of the century [1500], with illiteracy claiming as many as 99% of the women." Yet "by the end of the Stuart period [1688] the English had achieved a level of literacy unknown in the past and unmatched elsewhere in early modern Europe." He estimates a

literacy rate of 45% among men, 25% among women. This trend, slow but steady, led ultimately to a literacy rate of 95% for either sex by 1900. (*Cressy 1980*)

The process was accelerated in that early and most influential of colonial offshoots, New England. David Fisher in *Albion's Seed* notes that despite the stereotype of the humble Pilgrim, the average social and educational level of immigrants to Massachusetts was far above the English norm. By 1660, 61% of men and 31% of women were judged literate, based on ability to sign wills. *(Fisher 1991)*

Massachusetts' *raison d'etre* as a religious commonwealth feuled this trend. It was an article of Puritan faith that the ability to read would advance Christianity by enabling believers to steep themselves in the Scriptures. The first public funding of schools in 1636 became known as the Old Deluder Act, the "old deluder" being Satan, whose toils could be better avoided by a literate populace. Satan may no longer be in the picture for many educators, yet faith in the saving power of literacy endures. One direct descendant of the Puritan common-schools, the University of Massachusetts at Boston, stands poised to raise "literacy" to an object of graduate study.

Yet the Puritan rulers of Massachusetts, and their kindred in Cromwellian England, had another and contradictory purpose - the establishment of religious conformity. They had bucked Rome, then the Church of England, in quest of a reformed and purified faith. Once in power, however, they tried to impose the same unity of belief they themselves had deemed intolerable.

They were undercut first, by their own theology, in which individual interpretations of Scripture were honored; and second, by the more deeply fragmenting effect of popular education. A reading public became a more varied and confident public, one disposed not only to diversity of Christian belief but also of non-Christian belief. Such a public resisted theocracy with increasing force, until both Old England and New abandoned the quest for uniformity and resigned themselves to religious tolerance. What was accepted *de facto* by the late 1600's became codified on these shores in the 1787 Bill of Rights.

Of course religion was not the only factor underlying the growth of literacy. Cressy notes that the rise of an urbanized, industrial economy put a premium on skills of reading and writing: "During the century which followed the civil war the diversification of the economy and the growth of towns and trade brought an increased proportion of the population into occupations or social settings where literacy was important. Reading and writing became increasingly useful to an expanding sector of the economy . . [a] surge of retail activity . . . confronted people with the need to handle letters." *(Cressy 1980)* The combined influences of Enlightenment philosophy, commercial expansion, the growth of printing and consequent political quickening were epitomized in the life of Benjamin Franklin. An avid reader, he early on lost his faith, left Boston for more tolerant Philadelphia, prospered as printer, author, publisher, speculator and public servant, and crowned his career as *eminence grise* of revolutionaries.

WRITING AND SELFHOOD

Yet all this begs the question: *why* exactly should the acquisition of literacy stimulate individualism? In the English and American experience, it seems to have dovetailed with certain religious and political developments, yet is there real causality? Will the diffusion of literacy always lead to institutionalized tolerance, to laws that protect individual difference? The work of Walter Ong sheds light on these issues, for it penetrates beyond particular national cases into more universal cultural phases of orality and literacy.

Ong began as a classicist steeped in ancient Western literature, especially the epics of Homer. He later branched out into non-Western traditions and formed theories as to how a culture's position on the orality-literacy continuum is reflected in its verbal expressions. One factor is the simple problem of knowledge transfer. When a language has no written form, it is impossible to store information in records; whatever is retained must be memorized. And how is this to be achieved?

> The only answer is: think memorable thoughts. In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances . . . in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone . . . (Ong 1982)

Thus oral consciousness tends to be collective, formulaic and traditionalist. There is scope for originality, but not a lot, since individual minds are taken up with retaining the tribal lore. And while the advent of writing can itself take on conservative functions (as in the freezing of law codes or religious belief), it has a liberating effect on individuals. ". . .the text frees the mind of conservative tasks, that is, of its memory work, and thus enables the mind to turn itself to new speculation." (p. 41)

"New speculation" - modern students of the writing process surely recognize this effect of literacy. As Francis Bacon said, "Reading maketh a full man, writing a precise one." Reading might extend one's experience far beyond his oral community, in effect widening his personality; but writing has an opposite power, enabling him to synthesize experience into a new, different and uniquely delineated self. A high school English teacher of mine, urging students to keep journals, caught this truth in a slogan: "Writing is self-discovery." Likewise, Michelangelo once denied that he "created" statues from blocks of marble, insisting that he merely released the works of art buried within the stone.

Thus with writing: the habit of reflecting on paper elicits the inner genius (in the Greek sense) within each soul; it works like chisel and hammer, detaching us from group consciousness, isolating, refining, hewing out our selfhood. To be sure, this process occurs within oral cultures, but is greatly accelerated in ones that Ong styles "high-literate." For the former, language retains its primary aurality, and "sound is a unifying sense . . . the auditory ideal . . . is harmony, a putting together;" for the latter, language grows increasingly visual, and "sight isolates . . . and analyzes." (Ong 1982)

So, the slow passage from primary orality to mass literacy would seem to induce the process that psychologists call "individuation." In the English experience, this is reflected in literary forms such as personal diaries, which were almost unknown before the 1600's. Pepys' *Journal of the Plague Years* was a secular variant of the "prayer diaries" recommended by Puritan divines in prior decades, intended to promote reflection and self-examination. Before then, a record of individual daily doings would have seemed presumptuous.

We have noted above the long, tortuous process by which the budding "selfhood" of English speakers acquired legal status in doctrines of individual rights. There is no guarantee that rising literacy will result in political structures that protect differences of belief and lifestyle; indeed, there are harrowing counterexamples of reversion to majority tyranny, such as Nazi Germany or fundamentalist Iran. Yet the overall trend is encouraging - as a society diffuses education and "interiorizes" literacy (in Ong's phrase), it nurtures in its members a stronger sense of selfhood and sanctity of the individual, increasing pressure for legal protection. Men may read and write their way into freedom. Or, to cast the idea in the unoriginal but "heavily rhythmic, balanced pattern" of oral tradition, the pen is mightier than the sword.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, the worth of the above named cultural traits is a matter of taste. Wealth can spawn materialism, equality smother talent, individualism blur into criminality. Yet at this historic juncture, purveyors of the English tongue should consider why English has attained this unprecedented global influence. Is it purely an accident of conquest? A testament to cravings for the baubles of Western consumerism? Or might English, and the folkways it inevitably transmits, meet some deep yearnings of the human soul, yearnings that may just be universal?

Of course our multicultural ideals make us wary of any claims to universality, and with reason. History is rife with instances of cultural myopia, in which narrow national habits are confused with the norms of human nature. But in the current swing away from Eurocentricism, how far do we go? As far as China who, at a recent UN conference on human rights, refused to renounce torture as a judicial tool? Joined by several Third World members, it cited pressure to do so as a case of Western imperialism failing to respect differing cultural traditions.

It raises another question that brings us right back to our thesis: why did the students of Tienanmen Square, in their heroic defiance of despotism, raise signs in English as well as Chinese, and parade before the global audience a Goddess of Democracy plainly modeled on the grand old lady of New York Harbor? Whence came such courage, however rash and doomed? Might the seeds of it been planted and watered in some class, here or

abroad, by an unappreciated, underpaid and vaguely guilty-feeling teacher of English as a Second, and Gloriously Subversive, Language?

-The End

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